POLITICIANS OF THE SACRED GROVE: CITIZENSHIP AND ETHNICITY IN SOUTHERN SENEGAL

Ferdinand de Jong

Being a good politician requires diverse personal qualities, some of which depend on the cultural context of the political contest. One specific requirement for politicians operating among the Jola in Senegal is that they have to be initiated. This article deals with the initiation of a Senegalese politician and the consequences for a local political contest. The politician is Robert Sagna, the former Senegalese Minister of Agriculture and the present mayor of Ziguinchor, the principal city of the Casamance region. Robert Sagna decided to be initiated, and he was indeed led into one of the sacred groves of Thionck Essyl, a large Jola village. We may wonder why a Minister of Agriculture felt the need to be initiated. With his high status, income and privilege, he could well have considered initiation a relic of the past, part of a tradition modern statesmen do not have to conform to. The clue lies in the realm of ethnicity that has been an increasingly important feature of social life in Casamance since a rebellion against the Senegalese regime began in 1982. I suggest that Robert Sagna’s initiation was necessary to assure his political position.

We may also wonder why the people of Thionck Essyl were so eager to initiate this Minister of Agriculture. Obviously the villagers considered good relations with the Minister important and that is why they welcomed the politician. Moreover, Sagna’s initiation was so important to the villagers that the event became a major issue in a local election campaign. Surprisingly, the people who had initiated Robert Sagna supported his foes within the Socialist Party. Why did they suddenly shift their allegiance? The electorate of Thionck Essyl led Sagna into the sacred grove, but they also used other strategies to accommodate national politics. In this article Sagna’s initiation and its consequences for the local political contest are evoked to demonstrate that a local electorate uses a combination of contradictory strategies to come to grips with elusive politicians.

ETHNICITY AS INTERFACE

This article analyses an encounter between politicians and members of the Jola ethnic group in terms of state–society relations. The issue at

Ferdinand de Jong teaches in the School of World Art Studies and Museology at the University of East Anglia, Norwich. Earlier in 2001, at the University of Amsterdam, he successfully defended his doctoral thesis ‘Modern Secrets: the power of locality in Casamance, Senegal’.
stake is the extent to which ethnicity can be a discourse enabling subjects to exert pressure on the state. In other words, can citizens make their ethnic subjectivity instrumental in their performance of citizenship (cf. Mamdani, 1996)? I am not referring to the formal recognition of ethnicity as a political principle in the organisation of the state, as it is pursued in Ethiopia (Abbink, 1997). Instead, I examine how ethnicity contributes to the informal empowerment of society vis-à-vis the state. No doubt this question flies in the face of the well established liberal notion of a vital civil society: exclusive groupings based on ethnic, racial or religious criteria have the effect of polarising civil society, turning politics into a zero-sum game (Hyden, 1996: 99). Ethnic groups do not envision public interest, they strive for the exclusive interest of their members. Ethnicity is therefore considered harmful to the development of civil society. I nevertheless suggest that ethnicity provides an interface between local society and the state and thus creates the parameters of a relation in which pressure can be exerted on politicians.

Ethnicity has often been conceived by scholars and politicians alike as a threat to the state’s integrity. Fear of the powerful force of ethnicity was especially strong when African colonies were achieving independence. At the time, scholars considered tribalism a primordial attachment and felt that tribal ties were incompatible with national citizenship. But tribalism was soon revealed to be an ideology (Mafeje, 1971; Godelier, 1973), a social construct rather than a primordial given. In the 1980s many authors demonstrated that tribes had in fact been created by the colonial administration, showing tribalism to be an entirely modern phenomenon (Amselle and M’Bokolo, 1985; Vail, 1989). As far back as 1973 Geertz had already recognised that ethnic identification was stimulated by the process of state formation, ‘because it introduces into society a valuable new prize over which to fight and a frightening new force with which to contend’ (1973: 270).

Since ethnicity and state formation are so intricately intertwined, Bayart (1993) correctly argues that ethnicity cannot be studied as a self-contained social field. Although ethnicity cannot provide a basic reference point for our comprehension of African politics, ethnic affiliation is real enough to direct people’s political behaviour. Of course, we should be careful not to reify ethnicity and to fully acknowledge its historicity (Burnham, 1996). Ethnicity may then be shown to be a variable in people’s perception of the state and their strategies to confront or appropriate the state. Taking ethnicity to be a social fact, we need to examine how ethnic groups operate in the African state. The demands made by ethnic groups are highly varied, ranging from low-intensity demands for distributional benefits within the political system to high-intensity demands for separate statehood and independence outside the system (Rothchild and Olurunsola, 1983). Societal responses to the state may vary from incorporation to disengagement (Azarya, 1988). In short, an ethnic group may choose various strategies, depending on its access to state resources and its position vis-à-vis other ethnic groups. Jola ethnicity may thus be analysed as an interface between the state and society that functions in
sometimes diametrically opposed ways. In many ways Jola ethnicity has shaped the political struggle for secession, as is witnessed by the separatist struggle led by the MFDC. However, here I examine Jola ethnicity as an interface that contributes to incorporation.

Thus I seek to make a contribution to the current debates on citizenship and ‘primary patriotism’ in Africa.\(^1\) Citizenship in Africa is considered as essentially framed by parochialisms of all kinds: ‘In many regions—and certainly not only on the African continent—politics are increasingly dominated by issues of autochthony and of who “really” belongs’ (Geschiere and Gugler, 1998: 313). The issue at stake is to redefine the relation between citizenship and ethnicity. One of the tasks clearly lies in reconceptualising ethnicity. We need to analyse ethnicity as one of the keys, but not the only one, to political behaviour. Ethnic affiliation may be only situationally activated (Werbner, 1996: 1). In this respect Mbembe convincingly argues that ‘the postcolonial subject mobilises not just a single identity, but several fluid identities which, by their very nature, must be constantly revised in order to achieve maximum instrumentality and efficacy as and when required’ (1992: 5). Subjects can situationally shift their attitudes vis-à-vis the state. They can be ethnic subjects as well as citizens and, as I shall demonstrate, alternate between these positions (cf. Mamdani, 1996).

ROBERT SAGNA’S INITIATION

Robert Sagna was initiated in Thionck Essyl, a large Jola village in the Casamance region of Senegal. Thionck has approximately 8,000 inhabitants, who are virtually all Muslims and wet-rice cultivators. The village is composed of four wards that used to be highly autonomous units. Each of the wards is divided into several sub-wards composed of several descent groups. In pre-colonial times, political power was vested in a council of male elders (Mark, 1992: 22). Matters pertaining to the village as a whole, such as initiation and warfare, were decided upon by this council, which held its meetings in a central sacred grove. However, Senegal’s independent government imposed various other administrative structures (Darbon, 1988), and the central sacred grove lost its role as the focus of the political process. Thionck Essyl has recently been assigned the administrative status of commune, which allows its citizens to elect their own mayor. Thionck’s inhabitants are proud of this administrative status, even though all it led to was a splendid town hall that was blown up by the MFDC in 1997. The attack was a warning to Thionck’s citizens, who, after years of refusing, had once again started paying their taxes.

Before the introduction of the world religions, Jola communities

\(^1\) For recent contributions to this on-going debate see Bayart (1986), the thematic issue of Africa Today (vol. 45, Nos 3–4, 1998), the thematic issue of Africa on ‘primary patriotism’ (vol. 68, No. 3, 1998), Comaroff and Comaroff (1999) and the CODESRIA Bulletin (No. 1, 2000).
probably regulated their entire social, economic and political life by means of shrines (Linares, 1992; Baum, 1999). Some of these shrines were in the care of women. While some shrines were accessible to mixed congregations, the ones at the sacred groves were accessible only to the members of one sex and strictly off limits to members of the other one. Thus sacred groves demarcated separate ritual domains for men and women. Even today, everything that happens inside the groves is shrouded in strict secrecy. The sacred groves are still very much viewed with awe, but the initiation ritual is the only occasion when the entire community of Thionck Essyl focuses on its sacred groves. Initiation is compulsory for every young man. After initiation a man marries, receives rice fields from his father and sets up his own household. Owing to the increased participation in the urban market economy, rice cultivation is not as important as it used to be. However, initiation is as important as ever and has not been waived for any man thus far. Even men of considerable age are considered ambaj (non-initiate) if they have not passed the ritual. Ambaj is a term of abuse. The term denotes the status of a child and indicates that the individual cannot be held responsible for his acts. An initiated man is expected to remain silent about the activities at the sacred grove, and by observing this rule he will be respected as a man capable of keeping a secret.

Every Jola village celebrates its male initiation approximately once every twenty-five years. Among the Jola several initiation cycles exist, assigning each village a fixed turn in a cycle. Almost every year an initiation is organised in one village or another. An entire generation of young men born since the previous initiation is thus initiated in the sacred grove. Jola male initiation involves everyone born in the village and the community members born in the diaspora (De Jong, 1999b). The entire initiation performance requires vast human effort over a long stretch of time. The preparations start years in advance. The extended families expend much of the wealth they have accumulated in past decades. Large families kill up to fifteen bulls (smaller families kill a few), and enormous quantities of meat and rice are consumed by the villagers and their numerous guests. Without participation in the market economy this potlatch performance would not have been possible (Van der Klei, 1989).

In July 1994 Thionck Essyl celebrated its male initiation ritual or garur for the first time since 1962. All young men born since around 1960 were led into the sacred groves. However, in Thionck a conflict had arisen over the exact moment for the performance of initiation, and a few sub-wards had already performed their initiation in 1990, preceding the rest of Thionck’s wards. This fission was to play an important role in the political contests in 1995, to be addressed below. Here I will first discuss Robert Sagna’s initiation, which was part of the

---

2 In Casamance secrecy is practised both in everyday life and in a variety of ritual contexts, such as circumcision, initiation and masquerade performances (Mark et al., 1998; De Jong, 1999a, 2000, 2001).
1994 ritual. The novices of the wards who, for one reason or another, had not been initiated in July could still enter the sacred groves in the following months because the sacred groves were not immediately 'closed'. Robert Sagna used this possibility and was initiated two months after the big event in July. Sagna's initiation can be critically analysed only if we relate it to the usual way young men are initiated. Since I had attended the public part of the July initiation I pretty well knew what was supposed to go on and what actually did. So it was not hard for me to figure out what made Sagna's initiation peculiar.

Robert Sagna was initiated at the sacred grove of Kafanta sub-ward (Niaganan ward). Sagna arrived in Thionck Essyl on 30 September. He was courteously received by the officiant of the Kafanta sacred grove. The next afternoon, three novices were led into the sacred grove in a festive procession from Kafanta's central square. Robert Sagna, however, was taken to the sacred grove by car, accompanied by the grove's officiant, a few respectable village elders and several of his political allies. He spent the night in the grove. The next day Sagna and the three other novices exited the sacred grove. Villagers who were incredulous when they first heard about Sagna's initiation now appeared in large numbers at the grove's edge. Proud of the initiation of the most prominent Jola, they led Sagna back into the village. Photographers took numerous pictures. After some courtesies, Sagna left the village and returned to his usual business in the capital. Shortly afterwards, Robert Sagna was on television addressing the Senegalese parliament, his head shaved as evidence of his initiation.

When I talked to the inhabitants of Kafanta about this rather unusual event, they exhibited great pride in Sagna's initiation. People who were not born in Thionck Essyl were far more sceptical and suspected that the Minister's initiation was a purely political act. Before interpreting his initiation in this sense, I would like to examine how it diverged from the usual practice. First of all, it should be noted that Sagna's sacred grove retreat lasted only one night. This is rather short compared with the period of three weeks other novices were obliged to stay in the grove. Second, novices are usually led into the sacred grove in a festive procession starting at the ward's central square. Initiated men surround them to 'protect' them, and by instructing them, demonstrate the initiates' inferior status. The status of the novices is also accentuated by their physical appearance: they are bare-chested and wear raffia skirts. Since Robert Sagna was taken to the grove by car, it was impossible for bystanders to witness his status as novice. Yet while his status as novice was carefully hidden from the public eye, a whole show was made of his new status as initiate. When novices exit from the sacred grove they usually wear black clothes that cover their faces. Only after arrival in

---

3 Nowadays the duration of seclusion is reduced to two or three weeks to make the initiation compatible with school regulations and participation in the market economy. The possibility of entry into the grove after the July celebration was a modification to make the initiation of late arrivals possible (De Jong, 1999b).
their paternal compounds are these clothes removed so that women can have a glance at their sons’ and brothers’ faces. Robert Sagna, however, wore the black clothes in such a way that everyone recognised him as soon as he exited the sacred grove. Was it a carefully orchestrated way of publicising his initiation?

Robert Sagna was initiated at the age of fifty-five. In the past, men could indeed be initiated at a rather advanced age. However, owing to modifications in the standards of admission, nowadays most men are initiated before their thirties. Why was Robert Sagna initiated at such an advanced age? Sagna was born in Brin, a village on the southern shore of the Casamance river. His father is a Catholic and so is Robert. Catholic missionaries used to condemn ‘pagan’ practices such as initiation, which is why Sagna’s father forbade his son’s initiation. When Brin held its initiation in 1976 Robert Sagna did not enter the sacred grove. So when he decided to be initiated he had to look for an opportunity elsewhere. Why did he want to be initiated in Thionck Essyl? Robert Sagna himself suggested that he preferred to be initiated there because of the special relation between the villages of Brin and Thionck Essyl. Historical relations do exist between Thionck Essyl and villages on the southern shore, but Brin is definitely not one of them.

Finally, Robert Sagna was married and the father of four children. However, in Thionck Essyl men are not allowed to get married before their initiation. Although many young men now do have sexual intercourse and father children before their initiation, no man gets married before entering the sacred grove. The standards of admission to initiation do, however, exhibit considerable variation and I was told that the rule is not observed in Brin. The officiant of the Kafanta sacred grove argued that, if married men were allowed to enter the sacred grove in Brin, Robert Sagna should also be accorded this liberty when he came to Thionck. I found people considerably less lenient with regard to the rules of the sacred grove when it came to strangers of lower status.

LOCAL APPROPRIATION OF A NATIONAL POLITICIAN

Sagna’s career testifies to his intelligence and competence. He was raised in a Catholic family and went to Catholic primary and secondary school, which are better than the state’s public schools. He subsequently studied in Belgium and France and got a Ph.D. in economics in Paris. Upon his return to Senegal he was a civil servant in the Senegalese bureaucracy, and soon he became Secretary of State. Since 1978 he has been Minister of Transport and Equipment (three times), Minister of Fisheries, Minister of Tourism, Minister of the Senegambian Confederation (twice), Minister of Communications and Minister of Agriculture (twice). In addition he has held several positions in national commissions and has been mayor of Ziguinchor since 1984. Of course, he is a member of the Socialist Party *bureau politique*. Why did this Minister of Agriculture feel a need to be initiated? Presuming political motives, I was eager to interview Sagna, and he kindly
consented. Yet Sagna felt uneasy with the questions I posed. When I suggested that he had been politically motivated, Sagna said that anything to do with his initiation was secret, thus shifting identity from a politician to an initiated man (vis-à-vis a non-initiate like myself). Sagna denied that political opportunism had motivated him.

The most important reason for Sagna’s entry of the sacred grove must be that initiation has recently become an important symbol of Jola identity (Mark, 1992: 55; De Jong, 1999b). For a man like Robert Sagna, raised in a Catholic home, it may have been appropriate not to undergo initiation, but he may have felt increasingly uneasy with his status of non-initiate. This might have been why Sagna decided to be initiated at his rather advanced age. However, his position as mayor of Ziguinchor and high official of the Socialist Party may also have played a part. Robert Sagna was already facing practical problems as a non-initiate. Today it is increasingly common for politicians to attend initiation rituals, and give hand-outs and congratulate the initiates on their new status. Sagna did this, too, but could never enter the sacred grove himself and had to send representatives. Other politicians had begun to refer to Sagna’s status as non-initiate, suggesting that he could not properly represent the people. Landing Sane, another prominent Jola politician as the SP who headed another faction, openly ridiculed Sagna for his status as ambaj. For Sagna remaining non-initiated entailed a risk of being ostracised.

Sagna’s initiation became all the more urgent in view of the increasing pressure from Western donors and Senegalese citizens on the Senegalese government to enhance its democratic procedures, especially to make the electoral process more transparent. The Socialist Party was taking the argument seriously and trying to democratise the procedures for its internal elections. This meant politicians needed to have a personal electorate. Moreover, changes in the national political system created a new local arena for political rivalry. There was about to be an administrative reorganisation in Senegal: régionalisation.4 The regional administrations were to be governed by newly established regional councils. Sagna would certainly be an excellent candidate for the council of the région of Ziguinchor, which was to be established in 1995. He was close to President Diouf and had strong popular support in the region. In addition he was leading the negotiations with the MFDC, and had turned out to be an acceptable negotiator. Undoubtedly Robert Sagna was the most eminent Jola politician on the national political landscape and the most popular SP candidate in the Ziguinchor region.

Initiation was a crucial requisite for Sagna’s future political career.

---

4 This regionalisation of the administration is at least partly a reaction of the central government to the demands of the MFDC. However, the separatist movement was not engaged in discussions about the regionalisation, does not approve of it and, instead of accepting regional autonomy, maintains its claims to political independence.
Most of his electorate in the Ziguinchor region are of Jola extraction. His initiation at a Jola sacred grove made him more trustworthy to the local electorate.\(^5\) Moreover, his initiation reinforced his position in the Socialist Party, because he would continue to draw considerable electoral support in Ziguinchor. His initiation qualified him even better as an interlocutor for the MFDC, the leader of which had already suggested that any politician who had not been initiated at the sacred grove should be considered untrustworthy (Lambert, 1998: 592).\(^6\) Although it seems that Sagna’s initiation only contributed to maximising his credibility, I should acknowledge that the political competition within the Socialist Party was severe and no one’s position was ever stable. Sagna’s position within the party may have been reinforced within one faction, but not necessarily within the entire Socialist Party. Indeed, after his initiation several accusations were voiced against him. Some newspapers accused him of being a prominent rebel. Thus his entry into the sacred grove meant an increasingly narrow identification of Robert Sagna with the Jola ethnic group (and of his possible sympathy towards the rebels) (Marut, 1995: 167). The Minister walked a thin line, carefully maintaining his trustworthiness with the Senegalese government, the MFDC and the Jola electorate. On the whole, however, his initiation reinforced his position with his political base.

### Presence of Politicians

Robert Sagna’s case may be idiosyncratic, but the participation of state officials in the 1994 garur was not restricted to his initiation. Senegalese politicians are keenly aware of the need to play a role in events of this kind. They have to be accountable, not least in ‘traditional’ matters. Many politicians had been to Thionck Essyl to show their commitment to the village’s most important celebration. The public announcement of the initiation, a year before the actual retreat, was an occasion for many dignitaries to come there. That day Thionck Essyl welcomed two Ministers (Robert Sagna and Landing Sane), several members of parliament, local administrators such as the prefect, and the governors of the administrative regions of Ziguinchor and Fatick (Saliou Sambou, who was born in Thionck Essyl himself. The officials carefully selected

---

\(^5\) Interestingly the population of Brin, the village of Sagna’s birth, is generally identified as Bainunk. His Bainunk background posed no obstacle to his initiation in Thionck Essyl. During our interview Sagna stated that he considered himself both Jola and Bainunk. Indeed, the Casamance ethnic discourse classifies Bainunk as a sort of Jola. However, the fact that Sagna opted for initiation in a Jola village was politically wise. Consider the number of Jola and Bainunk in the administrative région of Ziguinchor: the Jola were 60.7 per cent of the population in the 1988 population census. Since they are a negligible minority the Bainunk are not registered under a separate entry (Republique du Sénégal, 1992: 21).

\(^6\) In early 1999 the Senegalese government indeed gave Robert Sagna full responsibility for the negotiations with the MFDC (Marut, 1999: 76).
the individuals they associated with. They visited their political allies in the village, and showed respect for the sacred grove officiants and the former *chef de canton* by visiting them. In addition, gifts were given in kind and currency. The former *chef de canton* and *conseiller coutumier* received fifteen tons of rice for distribution among the village wards: a gift made by the Socialist Party. Another five tons were given by Landing Sane. The gifts may have been funded by the government or the Socialist Party (the two are often confused by villagers and politicians alike). What matters to the villagers is which individual donated the money or goods.

Officiants with responsibility for the ritual’s successful performance knew exactly why particular politicians were invited. Their support was needed for several reasons, the most important of which was the free import of rice and cattle from the Gambia. At the beginning of the twentieth century, young men temporarily migrated to the British colony to earn a monetary income by cultivating peanuts for Gambian hosts (Mark, 1985: 93–115; Van der Klei, 1985). Some of the cash they earned was invested in cattle that were left in the care of the Gambian hosts to circumvent suspicion about accumulated wealth among kin in Thionck Essyl. Even now Thionck’s villagers still have cattle in the Gambia. Some of the cattle had to be led to the village for slaughter during the initiation. Moreover, many community members now live in the Gambia. They too wished to import cattle and rice, which were cheaper there, into Senegal. High-ranking politicians and civil servants were therefore invited to attend rituals to make sure they ‘arranged’ for the community members living in the Gambia to cross the border freely and import rice and cattle without being taxed. Below I demonstrate how important this matter was to the villagers.

The politicians’ interest in the initiation benefited the villagers in various ways, which was why the villagers welcomed the politicians and tried to strike a bargain. Aside from modifying the rules of admittance to the sacred grove, as in Sagna’s case, the villagers showed willingness to accommodate the politicians’ needs in other respects as well. Undoubtedly the most striking example was the modification of the ritual calendar. Initially 9 July had been set as the day of entry into the sacred grove. When this date appeared inconvenient to one particularly influential Jola politician the elders decided to reschedule the day of entry for 16 July. They made it possible for Saliou Sambou, Governor of Fatick and ‘son of the village’, to attend the most spectacular day of the entire celebration.7 This sudden change in the ritual calendar obliged some migrants in the European diaspora to reschedule their holidays and flights if they were to attend the ceremony. The initiation ritual accommodates the needs of migrants, but the presence of

7 A photograph of the governor as a full participant in the ritual, carrying a stick and decorated with beads, appeared in the national newspaper *Le Soleil*, 2 August 1994.
politicians is apparently deemed to be of even greater importance. In sum, the villagers had very clear objectives in their interaction with politicians. They knew how to manipulate the politicians, acknowledging that the politicians themselves had also set their own goals. The villagers readily recognised that the services were provided and the gifts donated for a gift in return: electoral support. But the villagers’ vote was not so easily won.

SOCIALIST PARTY CAMPAIGN IN THIONCK ESSYL

The Socialist Party had scheduled its internal elections (renouvellement des cartes) for various levels of representation in the party. While these internal elections always result in intense political struggles, they became even more intense in Thionck Essyl. This was a consequence of the division in the village resulting from the separate performances of the initiation ritual. Jola villages are frequently divided, and the decision with regard to the year of initiation is often contested. It thus happens that factions organise their initiation at different moments, as was the case in Thionck Essyl. Three sub-wards that shared a sacred grove had initiated their young men in 1990. In 1994 the thirteen remaining sub-wards initiated their sons. I cannot elaborate here on the intricacies of the fissure. Suffice it to mention that the conflict may have been caused by political factionalism in the first place. The dissension was experienced as traumatic by most villagers. Occasional fights broke out between the parties and one house was burnt down, supposedly set on fire, resulting in two lawsuits. In sum, the most important ritual for the reproduction of local society reinforced the split of the village into two factions.

After the 1990 and 1994 initiations the new age sets were given names. The three sub-wards that had organised the early 1990 initiation called their new age set Avance, since their initiation had advanced the 1994 initiation. The thirteen remaining sub-wards that staged their initiation in 1994 called their new age set Matkane, a term that needs some explanation. In a fit of anger one of the inhabitants of the three sub-wards had predicted that the 1994 initiation would never take place. Matkane means ‘That will never happen!’ The expression was ironically adopted by the rest of Thionck as evidence of their ability to resist the various obstacles to the performance of their initiation. Other names were coined in the 1994 camp: Avance was also called Kaan Nooni (‘they went on their own’), and Matkane was called Kaan Pehpeh (‘they went together’) or Diamoral (‘Unity’), since they were a majority who had acted in union (see Table 1).

The fissure resulting from the organisation of Thionck’s garur was to play an important role in the political contest. In May 1995 a bitter campaign was waged by the citizens of Thionck Essyl. The village was divided in two factions, one that supported the SP faction Robert Sagna belonged to (tendance A) and one that supported the opposite faction (tendance B). Throughout Senegal the Socialist Party is divided in two or more factions referred to as tendances. The system of antagonistic
TABLE 1  Initiation factions in Thionck Essyl, their political alignment, and Socialist Party candidates at the village and regional level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of initiation</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>1994a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factions in initiation</td>
<td>Avance</td>
<td>Diamoral/Matkane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP factions</td>
<td>Tendance A</td>
<td>Tendance B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP candidates (village level)</td>
<td>Baboucar Badji</td>
<td>Amadou Sadio (ambaj)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP candidates (regional level)</td>
<td>Robert Sagna</td>
<td>Landing Sane</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE  a Including Robert Sagna.

... factions is essentially a system of clientelistic relations. Much of what follows should be understood as an expression of Senegalese political factionalism that is not specific to the political process in Thionck Essyl. The irony of the electoral process in Thionck Essyl was, however, that the inhabitants of the sub-ward that had initiated Robert Sagna now supported his foes within the Socialist Party. Let me explain. Thionck Essyl had been assigned the administrative status of commune in 1992. This administrative status gives the citizens the right to elect their own mayor. Since the winner of the SP internal elections at the commune level was to be the SP candidate in the mayoral elections, and since the Socialist Party usually gets a majority of the votes, the winner of the SP internal elections could reasonably be expected to become mayor. The mayoral election was thus viewed as the crux of the SP internal elections. In 1995 the mayor of Thionck Essyl, the lawyer Baboucar Badji, was a man born in one of the sub-wards of Avance, and many inhabitants of the remaining wards (Diamoral) were determined to oust him from office. What had he done wrong? First of all, he was born in the wrong sub-ward. Whether he did a good job or not, the people of Diamoral were unlikely to welcome a candidate from the opposite camp. There were, however, other objections to his candidature for prolonged office. The most important objection pertained to his supposed obstruction of the 1994 initiation. Quite unexpectedly the ressortissants living in the Gambia had to face the Customs, and the import of rice and cattle to Casamance had been problematic. Baboucar Badji, the mayor of Thionck Essyl, was blamed. On several occasions he stated emphatically that he should not be, but to no avail. Moreover the Diamoral members accused him of not showing any interest in the 1994 initiation save for the one moment when he accompanied Robert Sagna into the sacred grove. On that occasion the initiated men of the Kafanta sub-ward had tried to prevent him from...
entering their sacred grove. The elders had had to calm the younger age set down.

The major problem during the SP election campaign, in terms of the segmentary political process, was that Robert Sagna had been initiated in one of the wards that belonged to the Diamoral faction. Politically, however, Robert Sagna belonged to precisely the same SP faction as Baboucar Badji (tendance A), the mayor the entire Diamoral faction was opposed to (see Table 1). If Diamoral wanted to vote against the present mayor, their choice also implied a vote against the extremely popular Minister of Agriculture whom they themselves had initiated. However, even if Robert Sagna represented the surest channel of access to state resources, all the Diamoral members wanted was to vote the incumbent mayor out of office. In the Diamoral camp, long-time SP members were joined by long-time members of opposition parties, such as the PDS, AND-Jef and even supporters of the separatist movement. All of them bought SP membership cards to vote against Baboucar Badji in the upcoming SP internal elections.

What about the Diamoral candidate? After all, ousting Baboucar Badji was one thing, proposing their own candidate for tendance B quite another. A good candidate was nominated, Amadou Sadio. He was born in the right place, one of the wards of the Diamoral camp. He had studied English and German and was a graduate of the Ecole nationale d’administration et de magistrature. His career was splendid and he was working in the Senegalese national administration in Dakar. Amadou Sadio seemed to be an excellent candidate. Yet his candidature was very awkward. When Amadou was still young his family had moved to Kaolack, a city in the north of Senegal. He had grown up in Kaolack and was a de facto stranger (anaya) in Thionck Essyl. Moreover, he was a non-initiate (ambaj). His father, a member of the Tijaniyya brotherhood, had refused to initiate his son. In an interview I had with Sadio he stated that he was a Muslim by conviction and he questioned the usefulness of initiation. He expressed a wish for the initiation to be preserved (as a ‘tradition’) but refused to enter the sacred grove himself.

It is only logical that the issue of initiation should have entirely dominated the electoral campaign. Politicians of tendance A knew very well that the mayor of Thionck Essyl could not possibly win the SP internal elections. They opted for an alternative strategy, and emphasised the importance of the future project of regionalisation and the creation of a regional council. At this level, they observed, Robert Sagna stood for tendance A. They tried to induce the electorate to support Sagna, who was still very popular among the villagers because he had entered their sacred grove. Their vote for Baboucar Badji would then be used to support Sagna’s candidature in the indirect elections at the regional level.

---

9 Members of the Tijaniyya brotherhood resist initiation (De Jong, 1999b).
The politicians of *tendance* B vehemently and correctly argued that the regionalisation project was not the issue in this campaign. They also contended that a vote for Amadou Sadio did not necessarily imply support for Landing Sane, Sagna’s negligibly appreciated adversary at the regional level. Landing Sane was the most prominent man in *tendance* B and, although formerly quite popular, he had lost much of his support. People said Landing Sane ‘can do nothing for the region’. Robert Sagna, in contrast, was considered a *travailleur* (worker). People felt that in his former capacity of Minister of Transport and Equipment, Robert Sagna had established more infrastructural works in the region than Landing Sane, who was the Minister of that department in 1995. If the choice was between Robert Sagna and Landing Sane, Sagna had a better chance of winning the elections.

As a matter of course, the politicians of *tendance* A also argued that Amadou Sadio could never be a proper mayor since he was a non-initiate (*ambaj*). Members of *tendance* B, however, didn’t say a word about Amadou Sadio’s status as non-initiate. This led to a paradoxical conceptualisation of *la politique* (politics). *Tendance* A argued that *la politique* and initiation should not be confused, but emphasised that Robert Sagna had been initiated in Thionck Essyl. *Tendance* B did not propagate an analytical distinction between politics and initiation. Of course, they could hardly do so, since their political unity was based on their unity in initiation. In practice, though, they did differentiate between politics and initiation, since their candidate was a non-initiate. Thus initiation and local politics were confused and became intricately intertwined. The breach between Avance and Diamoral became the major dividing line between the SP factions. Initiation was a major issue in the election campaign.

The SP internal elections were finally held in all the administrative units of the Ziguinchor region in July 1995. In Thionck Essyl *tendance* B won the elections and Baboucar Badji was defeated. In virtually all the other localities *tendance* A (Robert Sagna) defeated *tendance* B. Robert Sagna thus won the SP internal elections in all the villages of the region, with the exception of two. One of them was Thionck Essyl, the village where he had entered the sacred grove. This can be concluded from the election results I collected. The figures show that *tendance* A won the SP internal elections in the Bignona department, the administrative unit where Thionck Essyl is located. The results of the election (Table 2) also reveal that *tendance* A scored proportionally poorly in Thionck Essyl and lost the battle.

In the regional council elections in 1996 *tendance* A (Robert Sagna) won with an overwhelming majority. Sagna did not accept the chair of

---

10 A similar intertwining of initiation and modern politics is observed in other societies of the Upper Guinea Coast (cf. Ellis, 1999; Ferme, 1999).

11 I have a high opinion of Robert Sagna’s political instincts. It is quite conceivable that Sagna, well informed about Badji’s weak position in Thionck, deliberately ‘betrayed’ Badji by entering the sacred grove of Kafanta sub-ward. Thionck Essyl was lost to *tendance* A anyway.
the regional council, which was considered incompatible with his other responsibilities, and passed the office on to a political ally. At the regional level his initiation had clearly contributed to electoral victory.

CONCLUSION

Jola initiation has indeed become a symbolic resource. The inhabitants of Thionck Essyl used the initiation ritual to appropriate a high-ranking politician. Robert Sagna had to enter the sacred grove and used the ritual to preserve his status of trustworthiness. The ethnic discourse had turned the initiation into a resource for mediation. The Jola politicians, in need of voters, had to meet the demands set by their ethnic rank and file. This may be considered a true revanche de la société (Bayart, 1983a, b). Ethnic loyalty may be imposed on an elite that has not been dependent on popular support for its access to the state but is increasingly forced to reckon with popular demands (cf. Osaghae, 1991: 43). In some cases ethnicity can therefore be considered an expression of civil society, although not framed in a discourse usually associated with citizenship.

This possibility was a result of the pressure by the international donor community on the Senegalese government to render the political process transparent. The accountability the donor community demands of politicians indeed contributes to the expansion of the political space for local citizens. Surprisingly, the local discourse emphasises initiation as a requirement of proper political representation. The Jola situate political accountability in a very peculiar quality, i.e. in the trust generated by secrecy. So one of the paradoxes of globalisation is that the IMF and the World Bank make Senegalese politicians accountable to their voters, and that the voters express their political preferences in unexpected local idioms (cf. Geschiere and Gugler, 1998: 313). The case of Thionck’s political process corroborates the hypothesis that globalisation contributes to the reinforcement of local specificities.

Ethnicity was not the only strategy mobilised by the Jola population of Thionck Essyl. The villagers shifted their strategy over time. The initiation of the minister of agriculture pleased Thionck’s population

---

12 This bears a resemblance to comparable cases elsewhere in Africa (cf. Van Binsbergen, 1994).
but did not prevent the same population from nominating an uninitiated candidate. Whether he had been initiated or not was apparently not a criterion. What was more important was the villagers’ wish to oust the incumbent mayor. Although entrenched in local antagonisms, the villagers kept an eye on the resources they might be able to acquire through the electoral process. When Diamoral had to select a candidate for the office of mayor it selected a qualified man with good relations in Dakar. Thus the villagers situationally changed their standards for qualified political representation. Elusive politicians now have to face an equally capricious electorate.

In various ways the initiation ritual was accommodated to the needs of politicians. This is quite striking, considering the general assumption that it was very difficult, if not impossible for the Senegalese state to penetrate Jola society. Indeed, the assumption has been put forward as one of the explanations for the making of a Jola separatist movement (Darbon, 1988). Lower Casamance represents a clear anomaly in Senegalese state–society relations. In other Senegalese regions the Mouride brotherhood was instrumental in creating links between the administrative centre in Dakar and local society (Cruise O’Brien, 1971; Villalón, 1995). The state penetrated local societies by means of alliances with Muslim leaders. National politicians present themselves at important Mouride rituals to publicise their allegiance to the Mouride brotherhood (Coulon, 1999). A striking resemblance now becomes apparent, because a similar tendency can be observed in the Jola initiation ritual. This local practice is an occasion for politicians to manifest their allegiance to Jola ‘tradition’. Although participation in the ritual is no guarantee of political success, the ritual does offer politicians a way of penetrating local society. Secrecy, as practised in the initiation ritual, contributes to the integration of local society in the Senegalese public sphere.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is extracted from my doctoral dissertation (De Jong, 2001). Fieldwork and the writing of the dissertation were generously financed by the Amsterdam School of Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam, and the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO). I would like to express my gratitude to Wim van Binsbergen, Peter Geschiere, Cora Govers, Jos van der Klei, Peter Mark, Peter Pels and two anonymous referees for critical comments and useful suggestions on drafts of this article.

REFERENCES


---

13 I should like to thank Linda Beck for pointing this out to me: personal communication, 30 July 1997, Dakar.


This article examines the traditional initiation of the former Senegalese Minister of Agriculture. At the age of fifty-five the Catholic Minister was initiated into the secrets of the sacred grove and thus acquired the status of adult man. The article demonstrates that Jola ethnic discourse, in which male initiation has become an important symbol, forced the Minister to enter the grove. His initiation turned him into a full member of the Jola ethnic group and qualified him as a trustworthy man capable of representing the people. In the campaign of the Socialist Party internal elections the Minister’s initiation nevertheless became a major issue. The electorate did not show unswerving loyalty to ‘their’ Minister and nominated a non-initiate. The electorate suddenly changed their standards of apt political representation. The article contributes to the contemporary debate on citizenship and primary patriotism by showing that the Senegalese easily shift their position from subject to citizen, and thus empower themselves vis-à-vis elusive politicians. It also shows that politicians penetrate Jola practices of secrecy and thereby further the Jola’s integration into the national public sphere.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine l’initiation traditionnelle de l’ancien Ministre sénégalais de l’Agriculture. À l’âge de cinquante cinq ans, ce Ministre catholique fut initié aux secrets du bosquet sacré et acquit à cette occasion le statut d’homme adulte. L’article démontre que le discours ethnique jola, dans lequel l’initiation des hommes est devenue un symbole important, a forcé le Ministre à intégrer le bosquet. Cette initiation a fait de lui un membre à part entière du groupe ethnique jola et lui confère le statut d’homme digne de confiance capable de représenter la population. Lors de la campagne menée à l’occasion des élections internes du Parti Socialiste, l’initiation du Ministre a néanmoins été l’objet de débats. L’électorat, loin de manifester une loyauté absolue envers “leur” Ministre, a nommé un non-initié. L’électorat a subitement changé ses critères d’aptitude à la représentation politique. L’article contribue au débat contemporain sur la citoyenneté et le patriotism primaire en montrant que les Sénégalais passent facilement de la position de sujet à celle de citoyen, et disposent ainsi d’un pouvoir face aux politiciens insaisissables. Il montre également que les politiciens s’intègrent dans la pratique du secret jola et favorisent ainsi l’intégration des Jola dans le domaine public national.